

Working With Parent Advocates in Special Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When parents seek special education support, they are met with a complex system dictated by county and state jurisdictions and governed by federal law. The system contains processes and jargon that can be overwhelming and challenging. The role of an advocate is to work with the family to ensure that a child's educational needs are met. This position includes but is not limited to empowering parents by advising them about services, programs, and accommodations that will help meet their children's unique learning needs. The role of the individualized education program (IEP) team chairperson is to lead the committee process and include all stakeholders as equal and valued members of the committee. As an educational leader, it is essential to understand the role of the advocate as both a liaison to parents and a thought partner to the IEP team to help them consider eligibility criteria and federal mandates.

INTRODUCTION

The term advocate describes a person who supports or stands up for another individual or a particular cause. The notion of advocacy may occur individually, collectively, or both (Royea & Appl, 2009). One commits to elevating voices with important ideas when serving as an advocate. Advocates intend to face inequities, thereby challenging and hopefully changing the status quo. The intention is to improve the quality of life for others, particularly those whom an advocate represents (Mitchell

& Philibert, 2002; Zeitler, 2007). In reference to pre-kindergarten (pre-K) through 12th-grade students (who are considered children), advocacy is any individual or cooperative action that strives to generate systemic change, challenging injustices and promoting overall good health and well-being (Pithouse & Crowley, 2007). In education, a ‘parent’ advocate supports legal guardians to be child advocates for their loved ones.

Mead and Paige (2008) examined the history of parent advocacy and child education. Stemming from the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975, parents of children with differing abilities had historically been led to have zero expectations for their children. Once it was realized that this was a false narrative, parents became more vocal about their children’s rights under federal law. These measures and actions were the seedlings of parent advocacy as we know it today. As revisions to this original law were made over the decades, more student- and family-centered practices have been introduced. However, these practices, while under federal jurisdiction, allow for interpretation at the state level, further confounding the issue of transparency in special education.

Nickerson (2009, as cited in Royea & Appl, 2009) stated that parents of children with disabilities have the potential to, and essentially must, become activists on individual levels for their children. Nickerson (2009) further stated that advocacy can be accomplished by building relationships with school personnel, professionals, and service providers to advocate for the rights and needs of children and families. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 highlights the importance of parental involvement in building a child’s individualized program (34 C.F.R. §§ 300.322). This involves an expectation of advocacy on the part of the parent (Rosetti et al., 2021).

Rosetti and colleagues (2021) examined parental perspectives on the expectation of advocacy, determining that parents understood advocacy as essential in their child’s educational process. Their survey further reported parents feeling overwhelmed because the educational system requires “navigation capital,” (i.e., expending an exorbitant amount of energy to obtain support services for their children; Rosetti et al., 2021, p. 447). This navigation capital was particularly perceived as necessary during contentious circumstances with school personnel.

Inclusive of cultural and linguistic diversity, the expectation of advocacy may further perpetuate inequities when considering differences in values, a lack of linguistic access, or limited cultural responsiveness on the part of school personnel. The emotional labor required in advocacy along with the intersectional effects of racism and ableism often results in an impossible family burden (Kibria & Becerra, 2021).

Considering the navigation capital and emotional labor required by parents to obtain special education support services, there are times when a parent advocate’s

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